

At what age are children ready to begin First Grade?

The following was written by longtime Waldorf School teacher Joan Almon, for the Waldorf Kindergarten Newsletter, Spring 1986

In many Waldorf kindergartens today, some of the most pressing questions pertain to when children should make the transition to first grade. What age cut-off should be used as a guideline? What signs should a teacher look for to indicate school readiness? What should be done if a child has been placed in first grade too soon?

In the public schools, this problem of putting children into first grade too soon has become a major concern. I met one doctoral candidate in learning disabilities who spoke of "educational abuse", which could be characterized as asking children to do too much too soon. Public schools have particularly suffered from this problem; for many states, until recently, have used December 31 as the birthday cut-off. Some states, including Maryland, still use this date, but most states have now moved forward to September 1 or October 1. One state has even decided upon July 1, so the trend here is at least moving in the right direction.

In Waldorf schools, too, however, we are recognizing that we are sometimes placing children in first grade too soon. Audrey McAllen, the British Waldorf teacher who wrote "The Extra Lesson" and is very active in remedial work in the Waldorf schools, said in an interview which appeared in the "Bulletin" of the Remedial Research Group of the Rudolf Steiner College: "In our class assessments we are finding a number of children who are too young for the class, e.g. we see in the motifs in their drawings ... that the body of life-formative forces is only just consolidating its birth while the rest of the class are comfortably in the 9th year crisis. We note that these children have entered Grade 1 when their birthdays are from May to September, October."

There are many Waldorf teachers who have also come to the conclusion that summer birthday children are rarely ready for first grade at age six and should wait for one more year. There are at least two Waldorf schools in California which now use June 1 as the cut-off date for entry into first grade, although they review each child indi-

vidually so that exceptions can be made if necessary. It's important to point out that the birthdate is at best only a good guideline. Each kindergarten teacher also needs an understanding of the process involved in the freeing of the life-formative forces around age 6-7 and what signs to look for as indications that this has occurred and that the child is ready for first grade.

The question of the birthday cut-off is an important one, for it can save parents and teachers much anguish. Many Waldorf schools find themselves under great pressure to accept children into first grade even though the teachers do not really feel the child is ready. When the school uses a September cut-off, they find many summer children whose readiness is questionable at best. These children will often show only a few signs of school readiness, not enough to feel confident that the child is ready to move out of the kindergarten. Yet the parents can be very insistent that their child should move ahead. To hold them back appears as a sign of failure, as if their child does not measure up as well as other children. Or the parents simply see that their children are bright and mentally precocious and are eager to learn to read. The parents are then afraid the children will be bored with another year in the kindergarten. They fail to recognize that even though the child is quite awake mentally, he or she is not yet ready emotionally or physically to enter first grade. By using an earlier cut-off date the situation is clearer to parents, and they need not feel that their summer child is personally being held back. This can relieve much of the pressure that parents and teachers experience over this question. Of course, if a summer child shows strong signs of readiness, as they sometimes do, he or she can be allowed to move into the first grade.